DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 948 SP 038 532

AUTHOR Freeman, G.; Gum, M.; Blackbourn, J. M.
TITLE Proactive Approaches to Improving Outcomes for At-Risk Students.
PUB DATE 1999-03-26
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Failure; Dropout Prevention; *Dropouts; Elementary Secondary Education; *Grade Repetition; *High Risk Students; Parent Participation; *Student Educational Objectives; Student Promotion; Students; Teacher Expectations of Students

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines two approaches for improving outcomes for students at risk for academic failure. Both take a systemic approach to the problem by focusing on how specific circumstances create a reality of failure for many students. One school analyzed factors related to retention/promotion decisions and determined that four factors directly affected eventual student success: teacher beliefs in student's ability to succeed with intervention, student maturational level, parent support, and academic ability. Prior to the review, they based retention on poor attendance, lack of reading skills, and/or lack of math skills. Another school system investigated student records to determine why students had dropped out over the past 10 years. They found that third grade and seventh grade were two hot spots that should be areas of concern for school staff. Approximately half of students who eventually dropped out were retained or had significant difficulty in third grade, and 90 percent of those who dropped out failed or experienced significant difficulty in seventh grade. Based on this information, local schools then developed and implemented strategies to enhance success and reduce the dropout rate, including grade level teams, block scheduling, success rooms, looping teachers, and an accelerated school model. (Contains 13 references.) Contains 13 references. (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 430 948

Running Head: PROACTIVE APPROACHES

Proactive Approaches to Improving Outcomes for At-Risk Students

G. Freeman
Lafayette County (MS) Public Schools

M. Gum
Willow Springs (MO) Public Schools

J. M. Blackbourn
The University of Mississippi

SP038532

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Freeman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Proactive Approaches to Improving Outcomes for At-Risk Students

Introduction

The principles of continuous improvement are currently impacting all areas of society. Business, government, and educational organizations are all applying these principles to improve the delivery of services to their customers (Payne and Blackbourn, 1992). Lynch and Kordis (1988) emphasize the need to search constantly for the next step in a sequence of continuous improvement. In essence, improving service delivery is not a final goal or destination, but merely a step in a continuing journey.

Fundamental change in operational procedures is the key element in significant improvement (Skirtic, 1991). Much of the reason for the lack of meaningful change has to do with the standards and framework upon which the improvements are based. Using experience which is not current as a guide for problem solving is analogous to driving a car while only looking in the rearview mirror (Deming, 1987). Knowing how problems were dealt with in the past may not be helpful in solving current problems, especially if one's vision is not futuristic or forward reaching. One must "look down the road" to anticipate future obstacles, difficulties, or problems (Blackbourn, 1995; Waterson, 1992).

Guidelines and standards which focus on customer satisfaction, reduction of waste, and continuous improvement would foster fundamental change in educational organizations through enhancing the understanding of the requirements of quality, excellence, a sharing of information on successful quality strategies and benefits of

implementing a quality process, and the awareness of quality as the vital element in our ultimate ability to compete on a global scale (United States Department of Commerce, 1993).

This manuscript outlines two approaches for improving outcomes for students at risk for academic failure. Both take a systemic approach to the problem in that they focus on how specific circumstances (some rooted in an individual's distant past) create a reality of failure for many students.

Promotion/Retention

The promotion/retention decision is one of the most significant in the educational experience of students at risk for academic failure. Many students are retained based upon a standardized set of guidelines which relate to their academic performance, age in comparison to their peers, classroom behavior, or teacher perceptions and pay little attention to those critical factors rooted in the experiences of the retention year.

In 1997-98 the Lafayette County Schools initiated an informal process to review and examine the records of any 6th grade student who was retained in any previous grade. The students were divided into two groups according to current academic functioning (i.e. successful or unsuccessful). In addition, staff members documented: (a) the reason for consideration of retention, (b) nature of the decision (retained or promoted), and (c) outcome of the decision (was it helpful). Examination of these factors allow staff members to develop a profile (i.e. "What each type of student looks like.") of those students who were helped by the decision made for them and those that

weren't helped by the decision. During the 1998-1999 school year the process became more formal.

Results of the process indicated that those aspects of the retention/promotion decision which related most directly to eventual student success were tied to:

1. Teacher Beliefs —Those students who were most likely to be helped by the promotion/retention decision reflected a belief by the teacher that they could be successful with appropriate intervention. Also, if a teacher had a clear plan or idean concerning how to address a child's specific deficiencies, then that student was significantly more likely to benefit from the promotion/ retention decision.
2. Maturational Level—Student maturity, both of an objective and subjective nature, was a critical factor in the success of retention efforts. Those students measured by standardized instruments or considered by teachers to be immature in relation to peers were significantly more likely to be helped by retention.
3. Parental Support—Parental support of the promotion/retention decision and the on-going intervention prescribed for their child was a critical factor in the eventual success of the student. In addition, support available for the child in non-school environments was critical.

4. Academic Ability—Those students who possessed intellectual or academic ability commensurate with their age or grade placement, yet failed to perform adequately, were more likely to be positively affected by retention.

Prior to the initiation of the review/examine process, retention was based upon factors such as poor attendance, lack of reading skills, and/or lack of math skills. Questions concerning whether or not to retain a student were rarely framed as "Would retention improve attendance?" or "Would retention improve reading?" Review and examination from a systemic perspective not only identified the features which relate to a successful outcome from the promotion/retention decision, but also brought a focus on the question: "Will the student be helped by retention/promotion?" The guiding principle and the only valid basis for retaining or promoting a student is the welfare of that student.

Developmental "Hot Spots"

Havighurst (1953), Havighurst and Neugarten (1962), and Havighurst and Taba (1949) described the nature of developmental tasks imbedded within the structure of schools. Mastery of academic developmental tasks at any grade level form the foundation of success at subsequent grade levels. Certain grade levels possess more tasks to be mastered than others. These grade levels become areas within a school organization where instruction is challenging, behavior management is difficult, and student failure is more frequent. Such areas are "hot spots," areas of critical concern where large numbers of students struggle to master skills critical to their future success.

In 1996, staff in the Willow Springs Schools began a systematic examination of students who had dropped out over the past ten years, using the statistical process control technique (Hamby & Blackbourn, 1999), and plotting: (a) the number of dropouts annually, (b) the statistical upper control limit, and (c) the statistical lower control limit. Through this process, the staff was able to determine that the number of dropouts annually was due to a systemic problem rather than due to a special cause.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

An in-depth examination of the records of student dropouts revealed a further feature of their school experience. There were two "hot spots" identified as areas of concern for school staff. These were 3rd grade (a minor "hot spot) and 7th grade (the major "hot spot"). Approximately 50% of those students who eventually dropped out of school were retained or experienced significant academic difficulty in 3rd grade. However, fully 90% of those students who eventually dropped out of school failed or experienced significant academic difficulty in 7th grade.

Based upon the information available, administration and faculty at the elementary middle school levels developed and implemented several strategies to enhance student success and reduce the dropout rate district-wide. These included:

1. Grade Level Teams (Middle School)—The use of teams at the 7th grade level allowed enhanced communication between faculty concerning students

experiencing difficulty and fostered the implementation of a curricular approach which was integrated across content areas.

2. Block Scheduling (Middle School)—When combined with the team approach, the extended planing allowed for more detailed lesson planning, consistent disciplinary practices, and extended availability to students for extra support.
3. Success Room (Middle School)—In the middle school, an area adjacent to the work room for the grade level teams was designated as the success room. This room had computer terminals with internet access. Software on the computers supported both the text used in the classroom and the content presented there. Tables for group work or for student/teacher consultation were also included in the room. Access to teachers during their planning time, resources related to academics, and space for work cooperatively all allowed improved academic performance.
4. Looping Teachers (Elementary School)—Several elementary teachers were allowed to begin at the kindergarten level and remain as the teacher of that class through 2nd grade, then return to kindergarten to pick up another group. These teachers, because of the smaller class size, greater understanding of individuals student learning styles, and deeper knowledge concerning specific student deficiencies, were able to better prepare children for a successful 3rd grade experience.
5. Accelerated School Model (Elementary School)—This model, designed to move all at-risk students into the educational mainstream by the end of

elementary school, features challenging and stimulating activities structured to facilitate academic growth (Hopfenberg, et al., 1993). The result of establishing an accelerated school at the elementary level was a building-wide unity of purpose, a focus on all parts of the elementary school as an integrated system, site base governance, effective communication, and improved student outcomes. An increased number of 4th grade students left the elementary school better prepared for success in the middle school. A greater percentage of these students showed improved outcomes during their first year in the middle school.

The impact of these strategies on the dropout rate is as yet indeterminable. Those individuals impacted by the middle school strategies are, for the most part, still two years away from the legal age to leave the system. Those initially experiencing the strategies implemented at the elementary school level are fully ten years removed from this point. However, systemic solutions often do not have an immediate impact. Rather, the impact is often cumulative in nature and must necessarily be so to bring about significant improvement.

Summary

This perspective is radical in that it goes to the root of many problems facing schools today. The emphasis on the cause and effect problem solving paradigm not only prevents the identification of basic causes of systemic problems, but actually exacerbates these problems. This occurs through the application of solutions which bring about short-term relief, but no fundamental change in systemic conditions. The

inability to make fundamental change in an educational system severely limits the degree to which individual learning and development can be supported and ultimately fails to adequately meet the needs of those to whom we owe our professional existence.

References

Blackbourn, J. M. (1995). According to Hobbes: A primer on education and leadership. Unpublished manuscript, The University of Mississippi.

Deming, W. E. (1987). Out of the crisis. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Engineering Study.

Hamby, D., & Blackbourn, J. M. (1999). Continuous improvement manual. Willow Springs, MO: Willow Springs Public Schools.

Havighurst, R. J. (1953). Developmental tasks and education. New York: Longmans-Green.

Havighurst, R. J., & Neugarten, B. J. (1962). Society and education. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Havighurst, R. J., & Taba, H. (1949). Adolescent character and personality. New York: Wiley.

Hopfenberg, W. S., Levin, H. M., Chase, C., Christensen, S. G., Moore, M., Soler, P., Brunner, I., Keller,B., & Rodriguez, G. (1993). The accelerated schools: A resource guide. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Lynch, D., & Kordis, P. L. (1988). Strategy of the dolphin. New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc.

Payne, J. S., & Blackbourn, J. M. (1992). Learning through benchmarking. Journal for Quality and Participation, 16(5), 62-65.

Senge, P. M. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. New York: Doubleday.

Skirtic, T. (1991). Behind special education: A critical analysis of professional culture and school organization. Denver: Love.

United States Department of Commerce. (1993). Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria. Washington, DC: Author.

Waterson, B. (1992). Attack of the deranged, mutant, killer, monster, snow goons. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel.

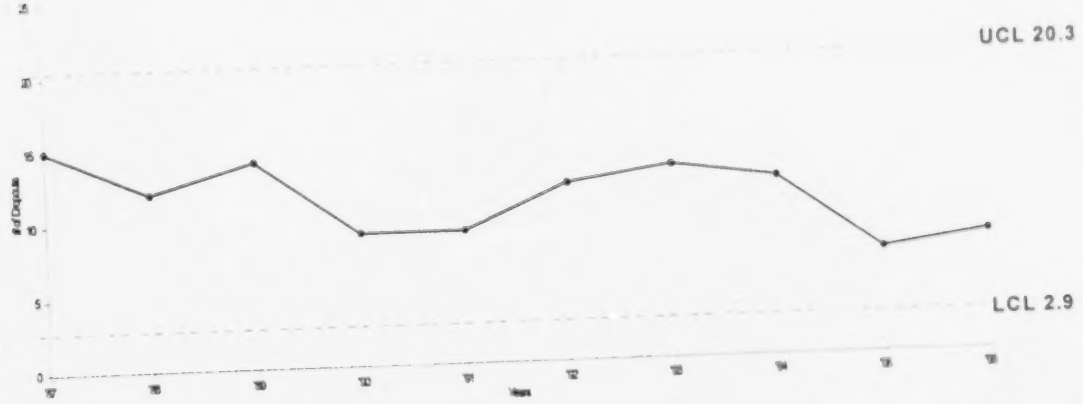

Figure 1

BEST COPY AVAILABLE